



Music and the Muses: The Culture of Mousike in the Classical Athenian City

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Transforming the Nightingale: Aspects of Athenian Musical Discourse in the Late Fifth Century

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter offers an interpretation of Aristophanes' *Birds*, focusing on the character of the Nightingale. It argues that the type of music she performs shows all the hall-marks of indiscriminate vulgarity associated with the New Music. Far from being a figure of beauty and charm, she represents the New Music, figured as a low-class female aulêtris. It further argues that the part of the Nightingale might have been played by the regular aulete. By identifying this character with everything that is musically debased Aristophanes presents a satirical parody of the musical avant-garde.

Keywords: Aristophanes, Birds, Nightingale, New Music, Aulete

It is no surprise that Aristophanes' *Birds*, with its light-hearted frivolity and its chorus of feathered songsters, is full of allusions to music. Old Comedy in general is packed with snippets of musical discourse, and it is, in particular, a rich source of comment, usually scathing, on the musical practices of the times. If we put two and two together and look for morsels of such comment among the various musical snacks provided in the *Birds*, the second part of the play offers several explicit examples, notably in its caricatures of the unnamed poet-composer and of the dithyrambic composer and chorus-trainer Cinesias.¹ Those passages are entirely characteristic of the ways in which exponents of the 'New Music' now all the rage in Athens were routinely pilloried on the comic stage.² The first part of the *Birds* is different. Here most of the musical allusions and performances seem to arise naturally out of the avian paraphernalia of the story; and one might reasonably suppose that there is no more to them than that.

Ingenious commentators have nevertheless risen to the challenge, and have proposed more or less persuasive readings of various passages in the first part, as well as in the second, which represent them as satires on contemporary musical **(p.186)** practices.³ I shall not review their analyses here; instead I want to push the same approach a little further, by focusing on a figure which has not been examined in detail, so far as I know, with these possibilities in mind.⁴

The role of this figure is at first sight straightforward, just what one might have expected in this amiable fantasy; but on closer inspection, I suggest, it becomes so enigmatic that we are compelled to look for an underlying motive of some rather special sort. If there *is* such a motive, of course, it should not be so obscure as to be undetectable to an alert Athenian audience; if it is unclear from the text alone, we should expect it to be discernible in some way through aspects of the play's *performance*. We shall therefore be compelled to offer some suggestions about how the play's original production can have given visible form to ideas which the text leaves obscure.

The figure in question is the Nightingale. Of course this creature must appear in such a play—how could a musical comedy set in the world of birds omit its best-loved and poetically most celebrated singer? And there indeed she is, called from her sleep in the thickets by the Hoopoe, Tereus, to help summon the company of birds; and at her music everyone on the stage, birds and humans alike, fall into ecstasies of rapture. So much seems unproblematic; but now the puzzles begin. First, the lovely nightingale is central to the musical delights of birdland; more generally she is emblematic, throughout the history of European poetry, of the perfection and endlessness of song. Yet in this play she utters not a word. She offers no verbal account of herself which would help us to reconstruct her meaning, or to interpret her interactions with other characters in the drama. Secondly, she performs no function whatever in the unravelling of the plot; she not only *says* nothing, but *does* nothing to propel the action on its way. Thirdly, soon after the second passage in which she is mentioned, which is also the first and only time she actually appears, she promptly disappears from (p.187) sight and is never heard of again. Yet here we are less than half-way through the play. Other curiosities in her treatment will make themselves felt later; but that is enough to suggest that the role Aristophanes is giving his star performer is not altogether what we might have expected.

I shall argue that Aristophanes' nightingale, despite her wordlessness, intervenes significantly in the musical discourse of the play, and constitutes a significant expression of musical opinion. As such she has important things to teach us about musical values and controversies in late fifth-century Athens. But I must first prepare the ground. Comedy thrives on parody; parodic allusions to images, passages and ideas taken from earlier and more overtly serious literature are part of its regular stock-in-trade; and the nightingale is a figure with a distinguished literary history. If Aristophanes' Prokne and her music are anything more than meaningless decorations in the *Birds*, their meaning can certainly not be reconstructed independently of her previous appearances in the tradition. We need to put together at least a sketch of the character of those appearances, and of the patterns of meaning which the image of the nightingale had regularly served to establish in the past.

The nightingale makes her bow in European literature in the nineteenth book of the *Odyssey* (518–23). Penelope is telling Odysseus, who has not yet revealed his identity, of her sorrowful days and restless nights in which troubling thoughts flock in upon her: 'As when the daughter of Pandouros, the greenwood nightingale, sings her lovely song at the onset of spring, perched among the trees' dense foliage, and with rapid turns pours out her voice's many notes, mourning for Itylos her beloved child, king Zethos' son, whom she killed in ignorance with a bronze sword, so too my heart shifts hither and thither...'; and she goes on to explain the dilemma that confronts her, in a pair of options, both hard to face, between which she cannot decide.

The nightingale myth sketched here is different from the one used by most later writers, but the passage nevertheless incorporates almost all the motifs and resonances embedded in the archaic and classical tradition. The nightingale is *χλωρίς*, an untranslatable adjective that hints at its association with the green freshness of Spring. The music-making bird is female, here as everywhere else in Greek literature, false though that is from a (p.188) severely ornithological perspective. Its music is conceived as song, not on the analogy of performance on an instrument. Our translations of the phrase *καλὸν αἰείδησιν*, ‘sings beautifully’, are bound to suggest that its song is outstandingly lovely; but of this I am not altogether convinced. The adverb *καλόν* is so much a formulaic pendant to the verb that it need express nothing about the nightingale’s singing in particular, nothing, that is, to distinguish it from any other song; the ‘beauty’ attaches to singing in general, not to this instance of it as distinct from lesser manifestations. To continue, her song is liquid, poured out, with rapid turns and many notes; and above all it is a lament, a lament for the child she has unwittingly killed. (In the more familiar tale, of course, she has killed her son Itys deliberately; but that was an act of revenge against her husband Tereus for his rape of Philomela, and her song is still a lament for her murdered child.)

Two points in particular need emphasis. First, the significance of the nightingale in this context, though given colour by reference to her song, is not constructed out of the song’s musical qualities but out of the mythical scenario in which it is embedded. It is the myth, not the sounds themselves, which gives the nightingale qualities appropriate to the purposes of the poem; and the song itself is not, in the last resort, the feature of her to which our attention is primarily drawn. The main focus of the simile is rather on the state of mind which, according to the postulates of the myth, is expressed in the song; and it is this that is compared with the indecision and emotional torment of Penelope. Secondly, once granted its mythologically constructed character as a lament, the song’s ‘many notes’ and its ‘rapid turns’, which are indeed there to be heard,⁵ can serve to enhance the impression of uncertainty, complexity, and irresolution which the simile seeks to convey.

At the same time, of course, the sweet liquidity, the turns and trills and many notes of the song are features that convey the image of a supreme musician. But from a musicological point of view we should notice the semantic instability of words naming attributes such as these. Right through to the early fifth century, in Pindar, for example, expressions evoking the complexity of a musical composition, its honey-sweetness and the numerousness of its notes are used to call attention to its delightfulness and its craftsmanship, **(p.189)** and to compel admiration.⁶ In the transformed musical context of the latter part of the century, however, references to a piece's suppleness, intricacy, and multiplicity of notes become elements in a vocabulary used to point the finger at the controversial 'new music', and are regularly employed in the context of criticism and parody.⁷ There is evidently a semantic crevice here through which it is possible for ambiguities to creep into the image of the emblematic bearer of these attributes, the nightingale herself. In so far as the patterns of reference and association awakened by mention of the bird attach themselves to the new musical and social context, they can acquire new resonances that undermine and destabilize the positive implications they had carried in the earlier tradition.

But I am getting ahead of myself. I have already suggested that in Homer the figure of the nightingale is not merely or even primarily that of the ideal singer, but takes its meaning from the myth by which it is surrounded. We may notice in passing that this is not an isolated phenomenon; none of the birds commonly represented by the Greeks as musicians gets this attribute directly from its actual song. The partridge is scarcely a 'real' singer; neither is the quail or the swallow, and nor is that allegedly most musical of birds, the swan.⁸ All of them acquire their musical characters from a penumbra of myth, religious association, and folklore.

Let us now glance briefly at some of the nightingale's appearances on the fifth-century Athenian stage in the serious context of tragedy. In Aeschylus' *Suppliants* (57–72) the chorus liken their own laments and their exile to hers; in the *Agamemnon* (1140–55) the chorus tell Cassandra that she is singing a lament for herself like some ξουθαῖ ἀηδών, a trilling nightingale, weeping insatiably for Itys and over her sorrowful life. The chorus of Sophocles' *Ajax* imagine the frenzied, shrill wailing of Ajax's mother, and contrast it with the more muted pathos of the nightingale's moaning (624–34); and his Electra identifies her lonely and sorrowful state with that of the nightingale lamenting for Itys, bewildered with grief (*El.* 147–9). In all these passages the nightingale is there, as in (p.190) the *Odyssey*, for the sake of a comparison, and the comparison is always built out of the mythology of her lament; that is the governing theme. But we can pick up other ideas and images too, which are accessible to the poet and triggered in his audience through allusions to the nightingale's song. As in the *Odyssey*, it is, explicitly, *song*, and even has words, the word 'Itys' endlessly repeated. In the *Ajax* the lament has more pathos than frenzy; but in the *Agamemnon* it is reflected in Cassandra's manic ravings, incomprehensible to the chorus—this may perhaps be an adaptation of the *Odyssey*'s images of bewildered uncertainty. It is a νόμος ἄνομος, 'unmusical music', or—trading on the ambiguities of the word νόμος—a song without coherence or order, bursting the bounds of due form; and Cassandra's outpourings are a horrifying δύσφατος κλαγγά, an unutterable or ill-omened clamour, sung in high-pitched strains, ὀρθίοις ἐν νόμοις. We may note that the nightingale's κλαγγή, which seems to indicate something more strident than ordinary musical sound, recurs in a fragment of Nicomachus Tragicus (fr. 1 Nauck).

Euripides speaks of the nightingale in two surviving plays, both later than our target-piece, the *Birds*. We can pass over the passage in the *Helen* (1107–16), which seems, rather curiously, to be a case where tragedy draws on comedy rather than vice versa; it is an almost verbatim echo of the *Birds* itself.⁹ A passage from the *Rhesus* (546–50) is unusual in that no immediate comparison is involved; the chorus speak of the nightingale they actually hear, singing in the dawn. Even here, however, she is still 'the bird that killed her child', and sings of her 'murderous marriage'. Similarly in a fragment from the *Phaethon* (fr. 773.23–6 Nauck), which again is pure scene-description, not comparison, she sings a multitude of laments for Itys. In both passages her song is also characterized in more directly musical ways—a 'delicate melody' in the *Phaethon*, the outpouring of a πολυχχορδοτάτη φωνή, a 'voice with a multitude of notes' in the *Rhesus*. Let us add just one more example, a fragment from the *Palamedes* (fr. 588 Nauck). The chorus are singing about Palamedes, unjustly killed by the Greeks at Troy:

ἐκάνετ' ἐκάνετε τὰν
πάνσοφον, ὦ Δαναοί,
τὰν οὐδὲν ἀλγύνουσιν ἀηδόνα Μουσᾶν

(p.191)

You have killed, you have killed, you Greeks, the all-skilled, harmless nightingale of the Muses.

Here we find as attributes of the nightingale and Palamedes a close affinity with the Muses, harmlessness, and for the first time in the tradition, outstanding skill—skill, we must suppose in the nightingale's case, as a virtuoso musician, a theme only fully exploited centuries later in an intricate passage of Pliny.¹⁰

The thread running through almost all this material is the theme of lament. But we have noticed the seeds of other ideas too. The song is insatiable, endlessly iterated. The repeated verb meaning 'killed' in the *Palamedes*,

ἐκάνετ' ἐκάνετε, may itself hint at this iteration, which the tragedians regularly represent by repetition of the name 'Itys',

ἂ' Ἴτυν, αἰὲν Ἴτυν ὀλοφύρεται (Soph. *El.* 148). In the *Agamemnon* there are graphic evocations of confusion and disorder, even madness, and a suggestion of it in the 'bewilderment' spoken of by Sophocles' Electra. There are trillings and quaverings, and the mysterious word ξουθός, which as first Wilamowitz, later Silk, and later still Dunbar have argued, probably has reference simultaneously to sound and to rapid movement.¹¹ The *Phaethon* has multitudinous laments, and the *Rhesus*, in line with the *Odyssey*, a multitude of notes. The *Palamedes*, finally, adds outstanding musical skill.

It is a complicated package. But you will see at once that it might have great potential as a resource for a comic dramatist with a good deal of brazen cheek, and with his eye alert for images through which he could poke fun at the excesses of the elaborate 'new music' that was fashionable in his day. I shall try to persuade you that he does precisely that, and that the nightingale in the *Birds* is by no means the figure of pure beauty and charm which most commentators seem to have imagined.

We first hear of the nightingale at line 203. The hoopoe is preparing to summon the birds; and he says that they will come running if he goes into the copse and wakes up 'his nightingale', τὴν ἐμὴν ἀηδόνα, and if they call together. Peisetairos urges him to do so; and at this point he must disappear behind the trees of the stage set. The next part of the scene is played out, then, I think, (p. 192) with the audience's attention focused on something invisible but heard, first the voice of the singing hoopoe and then the sound of the nightingale herself. Even if the hoopoe is visible on top of the stage building, as Dunbar suggests, the nightingale is certainly not.

The song with which the hoopoe wakes the nightingale consists of fourteen anapaestic lines. It has been much admired, and it is unquestionably charming; but that is not the aspect of it I want to emphasize.¹²

ἄγε σύννομέ μοι, it begins. 'Come my ...'—what, exactly? The word σύννομος is nicely and multiply ambiguous, between 'companion', 'spouse', 'mate', 'sharer of habits', 'sharer of accustomed places', and 'sharer of νόμοι' in its sense 'musical pieces'. This last sense is immediately reinforced. 'Release the νόμοι of sacred ὕμνοι'; and all the rest of the song is a prolonged evocation of the nightingale's music. She sings her ὕμνοι as a lament 'for my child and yours, much-mourned Itys, quivering in the liquid melodies of your vibrating throat'. The pure sound or resonance, ἤχώ, goes up to the home of Zeus, where golden-haired Apollo hears it, and plucking his ivory-covered lyre in answer, ἀντιψάλλων, to her laments, ἔλεγχοι, he sets up choruses; and from the mouths of the immortals comes a glorious ringing shout, ὀλολυγή, in tune, σύμφωνος, with the nightingale's melody.

This is all very impressive, but certain features of it are definitely odd. First, we may reasonably ask what *sort* of music the nightingale is represented as performing; and the answer is more than a little confusing. It is too many things at once. It is a νόμος, a ὕμνος, a θρήνος, an ἔλεγχος, a sound to be recapitulated or responded to by the lyre, the inspiration and accompaniment for choral song, and specifically for choral song characterized as ὀλολυγή. Even if everything else fitted, *that* would remain strange. As Dunbar says, an ὀλολυγή is regularly a cry of joy or triumph, and she likens the gods' ὀλολυγαί to the shouts uttered by Scotsmen performing Highland dances. Can they do this to music which is essentially a mournful θρήνος? The nightingale's song seems in fact to be represented as every kind of music at once.

It may seem plausible to read this as an essentially unproblematic piece of poetic rhetoric, harmlessly expanding its praises of the nightingale beyond what could literally be true. Perhaps so. But we (p.193) should bear in mind the fact that it is a recurrent complaint about composers of the 'new music' that they ignore established boundaries of genre and style, mixing every sort of music together in an incomprehensible jumble. Plato is particularly severe about this lack of respect for formal categories; and we may notice that in the *Laws*, his short list of four musical forms that were previously kept distinct but are nowadays unpardonably fused includes three of the types explicitly mentioned here by Aristophanes, ὕμνοι, νόμοι, and laments. Plato's fourth form, the dithyramb, may possibly be hinted at in Aristophanes' ὀλολυγή.¹³ It seems to me that alert members of Aristophanes' audience might well see through the charm of the hoopoe's song, and might at least smile knowingly to themselves at its images of fashionable genre-confusion. Their perception will have been reinforced by its references to the 'quivering' and 'trilling' suggested by the words ἐλελίζομένη and ξουθῆς, the 'liquidity' evoked in the phrase διεροῖς μέλεσιν. There is nothing wrong with 'liquid songs' as such, of course, which are there in our passage of the *Odyssey* and appear repeatedly in Pindar; and the other words have almost equally august literary ancestries, ξουθός being used of the nightingale in Aeschylus, while Pindar uses ἐλελίζομαι to describe the lyre's strings being set in quivering motion.¹⁴ But once a different context of thought has been established in the audience's mind, these words can readily jump out of their original frames into a picture representing the complicated, rapid turns and twists regularly mentioned as characteristic of the new music, and the melting malleable softness of pretentious musical aesthetes like Agathon, brilliantly caricatured a few years later in the *Thesmophoriazousae* (especially 39–69, 95–104).

Consider next the image of the bird's music reaching the admiring ears of Apollo. He strikes up in response on his splendid lyre, inlaid with ivory, and sets choruses in action; and the other gods in their turn respond with song and dance in concord with the music of the nightingale. The ingredients of this description are all **(p.194)** familiar, of course; but they are combined in a manner that is calculated (or so I believe) to de-familiarize them and indeed to startle the audience. Two points stand out. First, the image is in several respects unique. Nowhere else is the nightingale's song said to interest the gods; and though the gods are sometimes said to be pleased by human music-making, when it is performed in the context of ritual or prayer, there is no other case where they themselves are prompted into musical activity by singers who are not themselves divine. Most importantly, there is no other case in which Apollo, the gods' leading musician, is said to take *his* lead from the music of another, prior performer, so that Apollo acts as a secondary respondent, not as the protagonist.¹⁵ Apollo is often found as instrumentalist for the chorus of Muses, but it is always he who is the leader and inspirer.¹⁶ In the context of this tradition, the picture painted by Aristophanes looks hyperbolic and hubristic, even sacrilegious. It is a fitting preparation for the humiliating defeat of the gods by the birds in the closing stages of the play.

Secondly, though the verb meaning 'plucking in answer', ἀντιψάλλων, apparently occurs nowhere else, the literature of this period and earlier does offer a number of examples where one instrument is said to 'sound in response' to another. Many of them are collected in a single long passage of Athenaeus (634b-636c). Their interpretation is difficult; but the most striking fact about them is that almost all appear in passages designed to conjure up the atmosphere of a music that is non-Greek, exotic, and oriental. References to Lydia, in particular, recur repeatedly, and so do references to instruments of the harp type, πηκτίς and τρίγωνος. These instruments were marginal at best in classical Athenian culture, and in literature their names evoke both unrestrained, eastern emotionality, and the unusual complexities of melodic pattern that were made possible by the multiplicity of their strings. When Plato's Socrates outlaws them in the **(p.195)** *Republic*, no one is likely to be surprised.¹⁷ Aristophanes' nightingale is no harpist, to be sure. But the style of music-making into which Aristophanes' allusions so subtly insert her performance carries perceptible overtones of exotic elaboration alien to the established tradition.

If we pull all these points together, I cannot yet claim to have proved that the nightingale stands here as an emblem of the excesses of the 'new wave' composers. But I submit that there is a case to answer, and that at the very least this stretch of text is a minefield of musicological ambiguities.

As the hoopoe ends his evocation of the nightingale, her music is heard from behind the scenery; the bird herself is still unseen. What in fact the audience hears is not a singing voice but the sound of the *auloi*, the pipes. We may imagine at this point an elaborate little solo; but of its musical character we know only that Euelpides finds it ravishing:

ὦ Ζεῦ βασιλεῦ, τοῦ φθέγματος τοῦρνιθίου
οἶον κατεμελίτωσε τὴν λόχμην ὅλην

O Zeus the king, the voice of the little bird! How it filled the whole copse with honey-sweetness! (223–4).

I shall return to this brief episode later. Now the hoopoe sets off, accompanied by his still hidden, piping nightingale, to summon the company of birds in a long and highly virtuosic aria. This splendid stretch of text has been much studied, and I shall not re-examine it here. We shall move on to the next occasion on which the nightingale herself is mentioned; it comes at line 659.

By this time the spectacular bird-chorus has assembled. They have spotted the human intruders and set off to do battle with them; but they are persuaded by the hoopoe that these men are really potential benefactors who should be welcomed and not harmed. The hoopoe now invites Peisetairos and Euelpides into his nest, where they will be given something to eat and kitted out with wings. But as they are about to leave the stage, the chorus begs the hoopoe to call out the ἡδυμελὴ σύμφωνον ἀηδόνα Μούσαις, the ‘sweet-songed nightingale who sings in concord with the Muses’, so that they may ‘play’ with her, ἵνα παίσωμεν μετ’ ἐκείνης. Peisetairos and Euelpides echo the request; they (p.196) are very keen to see the nightingale whose lovely voice they have heard and found so delightful. ‘All right,’ says the hoopoe (665), ‘if you like. Come on out, Prokne, and show yourself to the strangers’; and out she comes.

This little climax has been carefully prepared. The *Birds* is a play whose effects depend greatly on the tantalizing postponement of expectations, both major and minor.¹⁸ The audience had been led to expect the arrival of the chorus long before it actually appeared; when it finally does, the theatrical effect built up by the suspense of its delayed arrival is made all the more impressive by its gaudy and spectacular costumes. The nightingale, similarly, has been a figure in the play since line 204, greatly admired, musically present but unseen; the audience will be on the edge of their seats waiting to see how she will be visibly represented. They will therefore form common cause, as it were, with the characters on stage who are begging the hoopoe to call her outside—Aristophanes has effectively lured his audience, if only for a moment, into fusing their own desires with those of the human and avian riff-raff of the drama. He must certainly have been preparing *some* dramatic surprise, to be created by her long-awaited appearance. So what exactly is it that the audience sees, as she finally emerges from the bushes some 450 lines after she was first brought to their attention?

We have to reconstruct her visual characterization from the reactions of others on the stage (667–74). It is immediately obvious that—within the conventions of comic drama—she is presented as a cross between a bird and an utterly desirable young woman. Peisetairos calls her *καλόν, ἀπαλόν, λευκόν*, ‘beautiful, tender, white’. Euelpides, the more outrageously vulgar of the two, wants to ‘get between her thighs’ without delay. Peisetairos exclaims at the amount of gold she is wearing, *ὥσπερ παρθένος*, ‘like a girl’. Euelpides wants to kiss her; and when Peisetairos points out that she has a beak like a pair of skewers, Euelpides proposes to peel what he calls the ‘egg-shell’ from her head, and *then* to kiss her. The line is probably best interpreted as meaning that he suits the action to the word and does precisely that. With this bit of slapstick out of the way, the hoopoe and the two humans go off-stage, leaving the nightingale and the chorus together.

(p.197) To repeat my question, what exactly do the audience see? I do not mean ‘Is the male actor convincingly dressed as a pretty woman?’, a matter which has indeed been debated by the commentators, but ‘Whatever the costuming conventions involved, how would the audience have *understood* the character presented to them?’, ‘What did they see her *as*?’. Some editors have based their interpretations on the fact that Prokne is Tereus’ wife, and have made her a suitable consort for the king of the birds, either a lovely, high society lady decked in gold, or a pretty young child-bride who can fairly be compared to a **παρθένος**.¹⁹ But this, I think, is all wrong. It is true, of course, that she is represented as Tereus’ wife; the description is unambiguous at line 368, and the fact is in any case presupposed by the mythological background.²⁰ But this conjugal relationship is not invoked when Tereus first mentions her (at 203, where she is merely **τὴν ἐμὴν ἀηδόνα**, ‘my nightingale’, as if she were a bird in a cage); and it can hardly be reckoned prominent among the images confronting the audience in the scene we are reviewing. Here Tereus, a person of high social standing, has called her out of doors, has allowed her to be pawed by the lascivious Euelpides without a murmur of protest, and has then left her alone in the company of the raucous rabble constituted by the chorus. Even on the comic stage, this suggests very strongly that her ‘respectable’ wifely status has for present purposes been shelved.

These observations are impressionistic and not necessarily reliable. But there is another point which carries more weight. This nightingale is not a singer; she is an instrumentalist, specifically a piper. That, we may note, is a significant break with the tradition. Now it is a fact that with certain very special exceptions to be noted immediately, iconographic and literary representations of respectable female musicians in archaic and classical times, whether they are girls or women, *never* depict them as playing instruments in public. They sing and dance, but they do not play; even the **(p.198)** instrumentalist who accompanies women’s choruses is invariably male. Women publicly play instruments in two contexts only. One is the context of the wilder forms of religious ritual; they play percussion instruments in the cult of Demeter, and percussion and pipes in the ecstatic rites of Dionysus. This manifestation may perhaps be called ‘respectable’, but it is clearly irrelevant here. The second setting is not respectable at all. It is that of the male symposium, where female pipers, **αὐλητρίδες**, normally slaves, notoriously provided sexual diversions for the guests as routinely as musical entertainment. The tawdry image of the **αὐλητρίς** in Athenian society is established beyond question in pictures on a multitude of fifth-century painted pots, as well as in written sources.

This, I submit, is the nub of Aristophanes' little *coup de théâtre* in our passage of the *Birds*, and it is reassuring to find that Dunbar seems to agree.²¹ (It is perhaps relevant that the phrase τὴν ἐμὴν ἀηδόνα, 'my nightingale', to which I drew attention earlier, is almost a homophone for τὴν ἐμὴν αὐλητρίδα, 'my pipe-girl'.) The audience has been held in suspense. They have effectively been promised a glimpse of this paragon of musicality; what will she be like? Perhaps they will have realized that Aristophanes was setting up a surprise, but they cannot have known what it would be; and the effect of her appearance, when at last she arrives on stage, could be made startling enough to bring the house down. Enter the figure of Music incarnate, probably dressed in nothing to speak of apart from her golden ornaments, with pipes in her mouth, shimmying provocatively at Euelpides. Where we might look for a vision of idealized beauty from another world, what we get is the all too familiar, degraded figure of the slave-girl hired out to play the pipes and to double as a prostitute.²²

What, then, from a musicological point of view, would this revelation convey? The best answer to that question is given by Aristophanes himself, in the *Frogs*. In the contest between the **(p.199)** poet-composers at the end of that play, Aeschylus represents the noble dignity of the old tradition, Euripides the trendy new music with its disrespect for established norms, its colourful complexity and its unashamedly populist emotionalism. They bombard one another with insults. Prominent among those levelled at Euripides are comments on the sources from which he draws his musical inspiration (1301 ff.). They come, according to Aeschylus, ‘from all sorts of lascivious songs, trivial drinking songs, Carian pipe-tunes,²³ laments, dance-music’. And with an eye to an effect very similar to that in the *Birds*, Aeschylus summons to the stage the Muse of Euripides, a naked, dancing houri banging a pair of ὄστρακα (pieces of broken pot or shell) by way of percussion accompaniment. Dionysus’ reaction is revealing: αὐτὴ ποθ’ ἡ Μοῦσ’ οὐκ ἐλεσβίαζεν, οὐ, ‘Surely the Muse was never a whore!’ If the message in the *Birds* is the same, as I think it is, it is to point up the indiscriminate vulgarity of the motley music represented by the nightingale, its affinities with the world of cabaret entertainment and sexual licence. It is no use protesting that characters on stage in the *Birds* find her music divinely lovely, and that the audience, through identification with them, have been enticed into doing so too. Consider who those characters are—two prototypical comic vulgarians and a gaggle of feather-brained and gullible birds, just the sort of ‘democratic’ audience, according to Plato, whose gutter-level tastes are to blame for the successes of the abominable ‘new music’.²⁴ Their approval is no sort of serious recommendation. Aristophanes has indeed pressed home his point as effectively as possible by the neat trick he has played on his audience, or at least the more gullible among them, first persuading them to join the characters in their rapturous enjoyment of the nightingale’s music and in their eagerness for her to appear, and then slapping them in the face with his image of just what it is that they, the real audience in the theatre, had been so foolishly admiring.²⁵

(p.200) There is one more issue that I would like to consider briefly. Editors have regularly assumed that the part of Prokne is performed by an actor who does not *really* play the pipes, but mimes to the music of the aulete who was bound to be present in any case for other purposes.²⁶ Every Greek theatrical performance required a piper to accompany its choruses and solo songs. Under normal conditions he was not an actor, costumed and presented ‘in character’, any more than are the members of the orchestra in a modern opera; he wore no mask, and was rather splendidly dressed in a garment that bore no relation to the scenario of the play, a long, decorated robe suggesting dignity and status.

But this view of the matter runs into difficulties; and there are features of the play's structure which hint at an altogether more dramatically adventurous approach. The hoopoe's song of invocation to the nightingale is the first piece of music in the play. Up to that point no aulete has been called for, and there is no good reason why he should be in place already, kicking his heels in the *orchestra* with nothing to do. There has been no point in the action at which he could make a suitably dignified entrance. The song itself, as Zimmermann, Gelzer, and others have seen,²⁷ must be performed without accompaniment. Dunbar disagrees,²⁸ but I find her scepticism unnecessary and unconvincing; to have used the pipes at this point would have disastrously undercut the effect of the nightingale's own pipe-solo, which follows immediately. Here, evidently, the pipes *are* played, but they are played either from behind the scenery or *as if* from behind the scenery. Which is it? There is at least one good reason for arguing that it is the former. An audience could be expected to understand the representation of pretended nightingale-music well enough even if it was really being played by an official aulete in full view, so long as the **(p.201)** nightingale were visibly miming. But here there is no question of mime, since the nightingale is hidden. For the real piper to be visible while the nightingale is not would be a pretty broken-backed piece of theatre. In any case, why damage the illusion? The moment would be far more effective if the pipes were really played from behind the stage shrubbery, that is, from the place where Prokne is waiting to make her appearance.

The pipe-playing continues while the hoopoe sings his summons to the birds; and it is still represented as the nightingale's voice, since the hoopoe has said that he and she together will call them (203–5). If it sounded from behind the scenery before, it must go on doing so now. When the summons is over, the chorus assembles *without* any singing, which is rather unusual. There is no splendid choral procession as there is, for instance, in the *Clouds*. The fact that we do not get the chorus's familiar entrance-song might be accounted for in a number of ways; but one explanation, at any rate, would be that Aristophanes does not want either to over-use his nightingale before her dramatic entrance at line 666, or to diminish the effect of her piping by matching it with the routine accompaniments of a visible aulete.

But of course he cannot leave the chorus songless for ever; various parts of the passage that follows are certainly sung and presumably accompanied. Even here, however, it must be reckoned at least uncertain that an aulete has appeared in full view of the audience, since once again, in the absence of a formal procession, there is no readily identifiable moment at which he could make a dramatically appropriate entrance. At line 667, by contrast, there is a heavily signalled entrance of just the right sort. When Prokne appears, it is a reasonable hypothesis that the 'pair of skewers' mentioned by Peisetairos is not just a beak on an actor's bird-mask, but is a pair of pipes, whether they are genuine or merely stage-props. Similarly, the 'egg-shell' which Euelpides will peel from her head to kiss her may indeed, in part, be a sort of skull-cap bird mask, but there is no reason why it should not be built, and perhaps detectably built, as an attachment to the *phorbeia*, the harness worn by a piper on his face and over the top of his head to support the muscles of his cheeks.²⁹

(p.202) Here, then, is the nightingale presented as a piper; and we must notice that the chorus is given another song immediately after her arrival, as though her appearance on stage served as a catalyst for their traditional musical role. They can sing only when the real piper is playing. According to my hypothesis, their previous songs have been accompanied from behind the scenes; and when the nightingale arrives, in the guise of a girl-piper, they welcome her as the one who is 'bringing the sweet sound to me', ἡδὺν φθόγγον ἔμοι φέρουσ' (681). She has brought the sound of the pipes out from its hiding place into the chorus's presence. There is a strong presumption, I suggest, that the real piper and the nightingale-piper are identical. But we can assemble more evidence yet.

The little song, only nine lines long, first expresses the chorus's delight in the nightingale's music. I shall say nothing about that part of it. But it ends as follows. 'You who play the lovely-sounding pipe with the notes of spring-time, ἄρχου τῶν ἀναπαίστων, lead off our anapaests' (682-4). What this means is immediately clear from the context, since the chorus sets off at once on a long and initially anapaestic *parabasis* (685-800). The nightingale, then, is being urged to accompany the *parabasis* on her pipes; and it is perfectly clear that she does so.

But does she *really* do it? Or does she merely mime to the music of a regular aulete who has after all been in his place all along? There is no way of proving the matter one way or the other. One might argue that miming would lose its entertainment-value and become tedious after a while, certainly in the course of a 115-line set-piece; and we know that she is still there about half-way through it, at any rate, since her lovely song is again invoked at 737 ff. But that sort of argument is perhaps unreliable. A more difficult problem for the 'mime' theory is the apparent disappearance of the nightingale once the *parabasis* is over. She is never mentioned again; and no character says anything that might motivate or mark her exit. Does she leave the scene? If so, when and why? And if not, what does she do for the rest of the play? It seems to me that both her absence from the plot and action of the second half of the drama, and the fact that she never utters a word—not to mention the lack of any music before the moment she is woken—are most simply explained if she really is a piper, and not only *a* piper but *the* piper, the one responsible for accompanying all the musical items in the play. What happens as the **(p.203)** *parabasis* unrolls itself is that she slips from what looked like an acting role into the role of accompanying musician; that is her real function, and she stays with it for the rest of the performance. The character of the nightingale, then, is not played by an *actor* at all, but by the official aulete himself. The spectacle of a man dressed—or rather undressed—as a cheap *aulētris*, taking over the functions standardly given to a dignified, formally costumed *aulētēs*, would constitute a continuing visual comment on the music and the play as a whole. She would be the perfect accompanist for such figures as the Poet and Cinesias in the later episodes, and would effectively undercut any temptation to take seriously the various musical offerings of the chorus. It would be a most unusual trick, but an effective one; and if I were producing the *Birds*, that is certainly how I would do it.³⁰

So why not? Why have editors found this surely rather obvious reading unacceptable? As far as I can see, the only serious obstacle arises from their assumptions about the traditional, and perhaps professionally guarded dignity of the musician, the haughty detachment from the frivolities going on around him that is symbolized by his lack of a mask and his impressive costume. 'The aulete', says Dunbar in this connection, 'had a professional dignity to maintain' (p. 503).

Possibly so; but the notion calls for two comments. First, we do occasionally hear of auletes taking a part in the action as well as the music of a piece, especially in the context of the ‘new music’. The greatest of the late fifth-century auletes, Pronomos of Thebes, entranced his audiences with his graphic changes of facial expression and the movements of his body as he played.³¹ Aristotle talks of ‘bad auletes’—bad, that is, by his own conservative standards—who whirl around to imitate the throwing of a discus, or who grab at the chorus-leader while accompanying Timotheos’ *Scylla*.³² Such antics, it appears, were not always below an aulete’s professional dignity. According to most commentators, admittedly, they **(p.204)** are attested only for dithyramb, not for drama; but as the *Cyclops* of Philoxenos bears witness, the dividing line between the two genres was becoming progressively less clear,³³ and another passage of the *Poetics* (1454^a31–2) is at best rather odd unless Aristotle is thinking of the *Scylla* itself as a play.³⁴ Secondly, if the strategy I am attributing to Aristophanes would have seemed bizarre to a fifth-century audience, so much the better. It would have been relatively pointless if it had *not* subverted their expectations, revealing to them that dramatic music of a kind they themselves might be tempted to enjoy would appropriately be led by a common *aulētris*.

To conclude, then. I have argued that Aristophanes has first constructed his figure of the nightingale as an emblem of the musical avant-garde, and has then made his point about the character of such stuff by identifying her with everything that is musically debased. He evokes the nonsensical, mould-breaking, hyperbolic theatricality of the ‘new music’ by plundering the resources of traditional nightingale-poetry and reassembling them in patterns that give them a radically satirical edge; and he shows us what the semi-divine patroness of such music would really look like by presenting her as a musical whore. By giving his nightingale one further, final metamorphosis, transporting her into the role of the official accompanist himself, he brings the whole of his own production within the target area of its own brand of musical parody.³⁵

I am grateful to those who took part in the Warwick conference for a number of useful comments on this chapter, and especially to Alan Sommerstein, who rescued me from several mistakes. Valuable observations were made also by two anonymous readers; I have tried to respond to most of them, though I do not imagine that I have satisfied all their wishes or stilled all their doubts.

Notes:

(1) *Birds* 903–57, 1373–1409.

(2) See e.g. Ar. *Thesm.* 39–69, 95–104, *Frogs* 905 ff. (*passim*, but especially 1299–1465); Pherecrates fr. 155, on which see particularly Restani (1983); on the ‘new music’ of this period in general see e.g. Richter (1968); Barker (1984) ch. 7; West (1992*a*) ch. 12; Musti (2000); and Csapo in this volume.

(3) The hoopoe's 'summoning song' at 227–62 has attracted particular attention. For discussion and references to earlier studies see Dunbar (1995) 209–24, and cf. also Pretagostini (1988).

(4) Many very valuable points are made in Romer (1983), an altogether delightful article; and we agree on a high proportion of the matters he discusses. But the main issues that I shall be considering here are not ones that his essay is designed to address.

(5) See the fascinating discussion in Pliny, *HN* 10.29.43 (81–5).

(6) e.g. *Ol.* 4.2, *Pyth.* 4.296, *Nem.* 4.14 (intricacy, complexity); *Ol.* 7.7–8, 11.4–5, *Nem.* 3.4–5, 76–9 (sweetness, liquidity).

(7) e.g. Ar. *Thesm.* 50–69, 130–70, *Birds* 1373–91; Pherecrates fr. 155; cf. Plato *Laws* 669b–670a, 700a–701b.

(8) See the entries for these birds in Thompson (1936).

(9) See Dover (1972) 148–9.

(10) See n. 5 above.

(11) See the remarks at Dunbar (1995) 206, where references to Wilamowitz and Silk are also supplied. Cf. also Taillardat (1965) 135 n. 4.

(12) On the passage as a whole see Fraenkel (1950).

(13) *Laws* 700a–b. For earlier hints of the impulse to classify music into 'genres', linking each to a specific kind of socio-religious occasion and purpose, see Pindar fr. 128(c) Snell–Maehler. An almost impenetrable jungle of such classifications is attributed in the pseudo-Plutarchan *De musica* (mainly on fourth-century authority) to musicians of the archaic period; see for instance 1132a–1134f.

(14) Aesch. *Ag.* 1142; Pindar *Pyth.* 1.4.

(15) In the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes* (416–512) it is indeed Apollo who is entranced by the performance of another musician, and goes on to play himself. But there the scenario is quite different, since Apollo is being introduced for the first time to the skills that he will make his own; he is not an already accomplished musician entering, in a subordinate capacity, into a performance led by another. It is also relevant that his tutor in this initial music-lesson is himself a god.

(16) For characteristic examples see the Homeric *Hymn to Apollo* 182–206; Pind. *Nem.* 5.22–5.

(17) *Rep.* 399c-d; cf. *Arist. Pol.* 1341^{a-b}.

(18) On this aspect of the play see Gelzer (1996).

(19) See e.g. Rogers (1906) on 665; Arrowsmith (1969), stage directions to 666-7; cf. Sommerstein (1987) on 670.

(20) The word **σύννομος** at line 209 is presumably to be understood at least partly in this sense, though we have already noted its ambiguities. The hoopoe's reference at 212 to 'my son and yours, much-lamented Itys' underlines the point, bizarre though the allusion is—given the context of the myth—in its 'presumption of domestic normality between these two' (I owe this way of putting it to an anonymous reader).

(21) Dunbar (1995) 422, in a note on 667-8. Others who take the same view include scholiasts on 667 and 670. Romer (1983) agrees that the figure is that of an **αὐλητρίς**, but apparently discerns no negative connotations in this image, and supposes that the qualities conveyed by her appearance are femininity, beauty, and elegance (137n. 7).

(22) For a sophisticated development of more traditional (or romantic) readings of Aristophanes see Moulton (1982) in (1996) 225.

(23) 'Carian' is a term commonly used to suggest 'slave'; Carian pipe-music is linked with symposia at *Plato Com.* fr. 71.12 K.-A.

(24) *Laws* 700d-701b.

(25) Aristophanes' strategy may in fact be understood in either of two ways. On the reading I have suggested, he relied on the musically 'right-thinking' members of his audience to relish the trick played on the more gullible, while enough of the latter—once they had seen the point—would delude themselves into believing that they had really understood it all along. Alternatively, the music of the nightingale had been so obvious a pastiche as to deceive nobody, and the audience would simply be relishing the spectacle of the ludicrous bad taste displayed by the characters on stage. In either case Aristophanes presumably hoped that by securing the audience's approval for his musical polemics he would improve his chances of winning first prize.

(26) See the meticulous and cautious notes in Dunbar (1995), 421-4, with the references she supplies; see also Taplin (1993) 106-7, though I cannot see that his doubts about Prokne's presentation as an **αὐλητρίς** are well founded. For a brief but thorough review of earlier opinions see Romer (1983) 137 with n. 7.

(27) Zimmermann (1985-7) 70; Gelzer (1996) 205.

(28) Dunbar (1995) 203.

(29) The various issues surrounding this point of detail are closely examined in Romer (1983).

(30) In discussion at the Warwick conference, Prof. Csapo suggested that the 'nightingale' might in fact be the accompanying aulete in his regular ceremonial costume. That is perfectly possible; it would alter the focus of the farcical exchanges at 658 ff., and would give a different dimension to the innuendoes contained in its hints about αὐλητρίδες, but it might be equally effective as comedy.

(31) See Pausanias 9.12.6.

(32) Arist. *Poet.* 1461^b30–2.

(33) See West (1992a) 365–6.

(34) The *Scylla* appears here (1454^a31–2) in a list of examples all of whose other members are Euripidean tragedies (*Orestes*, *Melanippe*, *Iph. Aul.*).

(35) That is not to say, of course, that Aristophanes deliberately composed music for his play that was 'bad' in the sense 'ineffective or inappropriate in its context'. On the contrary; the context is that of satirical parody, and a certain sort of 'bad' music—music of an extravagantly populist and decadent character—is precisely what it calls for.

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